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## **Support Cambodian Elections**

**Tony Kevin**

Several weeks ago, I visited Washington to try to convince the United States government, particularly Congress, to moderate its attitude toward the current Cambodian government, and to offer moral and financial support for the nation's July 26 election - the most important in Cambodia's troubled history.

Today, in Washington, too many insist on demonizing the Hun Sen government without all the facts. The Cambodian people are the losers. An overwhelming majority of them want to vote in Cambodia's first self-administered election since the 1960s. Indeed, well over 90 percent of eligible Cambodians have registered as voters.

Refusing to accept the legitimacy of this - perhaps inevitably flawed - election and its results, would be yet another error in the US' three decades of wrong policy choices. At best, the US has offered a cold shoulder to Cambodia since political tensions escalated into violence last July -cutting off much-needed aid that could have helped Cambodia's National Election Commission to run a better election. In fact, the mini-war -not a coup - of July 1997 was the inevitable result of a progressive breakdown of Hun Sen's and Prince Ranariddh's willingness to govern Cambodia together. By late 1996, their shared government had dissolved into two armed factions on the brink of war.

In July 1997, after the decisive military defeat of the royalist forces around Phnom Penh, Cambodia could have found a new political equilibrium within the framework of the pluralist constitution set up by the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia. If the outside world had let it do so. But immediately, old stereotypes began again to govern Western perceptions and policy.

Unfortunately, it became imperative for the West to prop up the defeated Ranariddh as the noble freedom fighter, and to isolate and pressure the winner Hun Sen as the Stalinist dictator who was trying to restore communism in Cambodia. But the last 10 months have produced ample evidence to challenge both stereotypes. To be sure, since the July 1997 conflict, there have been numerous allegedly political murders. But through much of this period, an underground civil war was under way -with royalist and Khmer Rouge forces fighting to hold territory and win international support.

Hun Sen is clearly aggressive in pursuing and holding onto power, but he has in various important ways accommodated donor government demands to set up needed election laws and institutions and to improve vote-counting arrangements. Remarkably, he personally petitioned King Sihanouk to grant amnesty to Prince Ranariddh, allowing his arch-rival back into Cambodia's political process.

Hun Sen has sworn he'll step down if defeated: an admittedly unlikely prospect. The likeliest outcome is that, if elected, he'd govern in coalition. He has, albeit belatedly, undertaken to investigate the murders. There is also evidence of pluralism and checks and balances within his political party, the Cambodia People's Party (CPP).

Of course, the West should not give Hun Sen a blank check. But through diplomacy and aid, we should continue actively to press for human rights, a free press, a working parliament, and other institutions fundamental to a pluralist and accountable civil society. However, we should do this within an overall policy of respect for Cambodia's Constitution and laws, and acceptance of the legality of the present Cambodian government. A coalition government with strong CPP participation may offer Cambodians their best available prospect for political stability, improved governance, and resumed economic growth.

Demonizing and isolating a Hun Sen-led Cambodia would be a blind and regressive policy. It's time for the US to embrace a clearer, larger vision for a nation that we've too often punished, and to adopt a fresh generosity toward the Cambodian people.

- Tony Kevin was Australia's ambassador to Cambodia from 1994 to '97. He is writing a book on Cambodian politics since 1993.